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**The American Revolution**

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Moscow, 2017

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# Introduction

*The American Revolution* (1775-83) is also known as *the American Revolutionary War* and *the U.S. War of Independence*. The conflict arose from growing tensions between residents of Great Britain’s 13 North American colonies and the colonial government, which represented the British crown. Skirmishes between British troops and colonial militiamen in Lexington and Concord in April 1775 started the armed conflict, and by the following summer, the rebels were waging a full-scale war for their independence. France entered the American Revolution on the side of the colonists in 1778, turning what had essentially been a civil war into an international conflict. After French assistance helped the Continental Army force the British surrender at Yorktown, Virginia, in 1781, the Americans had effectively won their independence, though fighting would not formally end until 1783.

*George Washington , 1732-1799*

# Causes of the War

The conflict between Britain and her American colonists was triggered by the financial costs of the Anglo-French wars of the previous thirty years, in particular the Seven Years War (1756-63). A principal theatre of conflict had been in North America, where it was felt that the colonials had failed to play their part either financially or in the fighting. In the years immediately after the war, the army in North America consumed 4% of British government spending. This cost, combined with the victories over the French had increased British interest in their colonies. Ironically, those victories had also removed one element tying the Americans to Britain - fear of French strangulation. In 1756, the French held Canada, the Ohio Valley and the Mississippi, isolating the British colonies on the eastern seaboard. By 1763 that threat had been removed.

At the heart of the division between the colonists and Britain was a fundamentally different concept of the purpose of the colonies. To the British, their American lands were there largely to provide raw materials to Britain and be consumers of British manufactured goods. This feeling expressed itself in an increasing control and restriction of American trade and industry that helped to build up resentment, especially in New England, where manufacturing goods for export to the southern colonies was already an important part of the local economy. In contrast, many of the colonists saw themselves as carving a new society from the wilderness, unrestricted by decisions made 3,000 miles away across the Atlantic.

For more than a decade before the outbreak of the American Revolution in 1775, tensions had been building between colonists and the British authorities. Attempts by the British government to raise revenue by taxing the colonies (notably the Stamp Act of 1765, the Townshend Tariffs of 1767 and the Tea Act of 1773) met with heated protest among many colonists, who resented their lack of representation in Parliament and demanded the same rights as other British subjects. Colonial resistance led to violence in 1770, when British soldiers opened fire on a mob of colonists, killing five men in what was known as the *Boston Massacre*. After December 1773, when a band of Bostonians dressed as Mohawk Indians boarded British ships and dumped 342 chests of tea into Boston Harbor (known as *Boston Tea Party*), an outraged Parliament passed a series of measures (known as the Intolerable, or Coercive Acts) designed to reassert imperial authority in Massachusetts.

*Boston Tea Party, 1773*

# The War Begins

The first shots of the war were fired in Massachusetts. Here the most rebellious of the colonies was faced by General Thomas Gage, Governor of Massachusetts and commander-in-chief of all British troops in North America. Lord North (Prime Minister of Great Britain at the time) had considered the colony to be in revolt from February, but failed to appreciate either the scale of the discontent in Massachusetts or that it was also present across the other colonies.

The fighting began with a relatively minor skirmish. On 19 April 1775 Gage despatched a column to seize an arms cache thought to be at the town of Concord, only 16 miles from Boston. Unluckily news of the expedition leaked, and at Lexington the British encountered a small force of American militia. It is not known which side fired the first shots of the war, but the militia withdrew and the British continued to Concord. However, it was the return to Boston that revealed the scale of the revolt and the weakness of the British position. Outnumbered by hostile forces, the British column was being slowly destroyed by sniping until it met up with a relief force at Lexington and was able to return relatively safely to Boston.

*Battle of Lexington, 1775*

On June 15, 1775 *George Washington* was appointed commander of the new Continental army, created in the same month out of the forces besieging Boston. Washington was to face formidable problems in his task. First amongst them was the persistent belief in the ability of the militia to win the war without a permanent professional army. This belief in the militia system had been one of the problems faced by the British in their attempts to raise taxes in America. His second problem was that troops from the different colonies were often unwilling to serve away from their colony, or in mixed units with men from other colonies. A third problem was that the army was not properly supplied, a problem that remained for most of the war. Fourth, many of his men were serving for short periods of time and several operations, such as the 1775 invasion of Canada, were adversely effected by enlistments ending. Finally, the rebellious attitude that had prompted many to join the army also made them resistant to taking orders from officers they had not selected. Washington was to have frequent problems getting men to accept the principle that the best man should have a post, not simply the one who had served for longest. Washington's most important contribute to the war was the patience with which he turned the forces he found outside Boston into an army that was eventually able to take on regular British troops on the battlefield.

# Declaring Independence

By the start of 1776 it was clear even in Britain that the colonial revolt was not the work of a small number of malcontents. The British response was to plan what was then the biggest transatlantic expedition ever carried out. Troops sent from Britain were to be sent to three separate theatres of war, there to reinforce the troops already present. The first campaign was to be in Canada, where the American invasion was to be repulsed, followed by a march down to the Hudson. The second was to be sent to reinforce the forces in Boston, to be used to capture New York and perhaps meet up with the army marching down from Canada. Finally, a third force was to be sent to the south, where it was confidently expected that the loyalists would rise against the rebels as soon as a British army arrived. Two of these three expeditions would achieve at least partial success, but the year ended with the British no nearer to ending the revolt.

In June 1776, with the Revolutionary War in full swing, a growing majority of the colonists had come to favor independence from Britain. On July 4, the Continental Congress voted to adopt *the Declaration of Independence*, drafted by a five-man committee including Franklin and John Adams but written mainly by Jefferson.

The Declaration of Independence was a momentous event. It gave a clarity to the American cause that it had previously lacked, and that the British were never to gain. It played a part in convincing foreign powers to help the rebels, overcoming a fear that a reconciliation between Britain and the colonies could cause any intervention to backfire. It also made any hopes of a peaceful settlement much less likely - Independence once declared could not easily be surrendered.

# Saratoga: Revolutionary War Turning Point

British strategy in 1777 involved two main prongs of attack, aimed at separating New England (where the rebellion enjoyed the most popular support) from the other colonies. To that end, General John Burgoyne’s army aimed to march south from Canada toward a planned meeting with General William Howe’s forces on the Hudson River. Burgoyne’s men dealt a devastating loss to the Americans in July by retaking Fort Ticonderoga, while Howe decided to move his troops southward from New York to confront Washington’s army near the Chesapeake Bay. The British defeated the Americans at Brandywine Creek, Pennsylvania, on September 11 and entered Philadelphia on September 25. Washington rebounded to strike Germantown in early October before withdrawing to winter quarters near Valley Forge.

Howe’s move had left Burgoyne’s army exposed near Saratoga, New York, and the British suffered the consequences of this on September 19, when an American force under General Horatio Gates defeated them at Freeman’s Farm (known as *the first Battle of Saratoga*). After suffering another defeat on October 7 at Bemis Heights (*the Second Battle of Saratoga*), Burgoyne surrendered his remaining forces on October 17. The American victory Saratoga would prove to be a turning point of the American Revolution, as it prompted France (which had been secretly aiding the rebels since 1776) to enter the war openly on the American side, though it would not formally declare war on Great Britain until June 1778. The American Revolution, which had begun as a civil conflict between Britain and its colonies, had become *a world war*.

# British Policies

Following news of the surrender at Saratoga and concern over French intervention, the British decided to completely accept the original demands made by the American Patriots. Parliament repealed the remaining tax on tea and declared that no taxes would ever be imposed on colonies without their consent (except for custom duties, the revenues of which would be returned to the colonies). A Commission was formed to negotiate directly with the Continental Congress for the first time. The Commission was empowered to suspend all the other objectionable acts by Parliament passed since 1763, issue general pardons, and declare a cessation of hostilities. The Commissioners arrived in America in June 1778 and offered to place the colonies in the condition of 1763 if they would return to the allegiance of the King. Moreover, they agreed that no troops would be placed in the colonies without their consent. The Congress refused to negotiate with the commission unless they first acknowledged American independence or withdrew all troops. On October 3, 1778, the British published a proclamation offering amnesty to any colonies or individuals who accepted their proposals within forty days, implying serious consequences if they still refused. There was no positive reply.

*King George III, 1738-1820*

King George III gave up all hope of subduing America by more armies, while Britain had a European war to fight. "It was a joke," he said, "to think of keeping Pennsylvania." There was no hope of recovering New England. But the King was still determined "never to acknowledge the independence of the Americans, and to punish their contumacy by the indefinite prolongation of a war which promised to be eternal".His plan was to keep the 30,000 men garrisoned in New York, Rhode Island, Quebec, and Florida; other forces would attack the French and Spanish in the West Indies. To punish the Americans the King planned to destroy their coasting-trade, bombard their ports; sack and burn towns along the coast and turn loose the Native Americans to attack civilians in frontier settlements. These operations, the King felt, would inspire the Loyalists; would splinter the Congress; and "would keep the rebels harassed, anxious, and poor, until the day when, by a natural and inevitable process, discontent and disappointment were converted into penitence and remorse" and they would beg to return to his authority. The plan meant destruction for the Loyalists and loyal Native Americans, an indefinite prolongation of a costly war, and the risk of disaster as the French and Spanish assembled an armada to invade the British Isles. The King hoped to re-subjugate the rebellious colonies after dealing with the Americans' European allies.

# Loyalists During the American Revolution

Americans today think of the War for Independence as a revolution, but in important respects it was also a civil war. American *Loyalists*, or "Tories" as their opponents called them, opposed the Revolution, and many took up arms against the rebels. Estimates of the number of Loyalists range as high as 500,000, or 20 percent of the white population of the colonies.

What motivated the Loyalists? Most educated Americans, whether Loyalist or Revolutionary, accepted John Locke's theory of natural rights and limited government. Thus, the Loyalists, like the rebels, criticized such British actions as the Stamp Act and the Coercive Acts. Loyalists wanted to pursue peaceful forms of protest because they believed that violence would give rise to mob rule or tyranny. They also believed that independence would mean the loss of economic benefits derived from membership in the British mercantile system.

Loyalists came from all walks of life. The majority were small farmers, artisans and shopkeepers. Not surprisingly, most British officials remained loyal to the Crown. Wealthy merchants tended to remain loyal, as did Anglican ministers, especially in Puritan New England. Loyalists also included some blacks (to whom the British promised freedom), Indians, indentured servants and some German immigrants, who supported the Crown mainly because George III was of German origin.

The number of Loyalists in each colony varied. Recent estimates suggest that half the population of New York was Loyalist; it had an aristocratic culture and was occupied throughout the Revolution by the British. In the Carolinas, back-country farmers were Loyalist, whereas the Tidewater planters tended to support the Revolution.

During the Revolution, most Loyalists suffered little from their views. However, a minority, about 19,000 Loyalists, armed and supplied by the British, fought in the conflict.

The Paris Peace Treaty (see below) required Congress to restore property confiscated from Loyalists. The heirs of William Penn in Pennsylvania, for example, and those of George Calvert in Maryland received generous settlements. In the Carolinas, where enmity between rebels and Loyalists was especially strong, few of the latter regained their property. In New York and the Carolinas, the confiscations from Loyalists resulted in something of a social revolution as large estates were parceled out to yeoman farmers.

About 100,000 Loyalists left the country, including William Franklin, the son of Benjamin, and John Singleton Copley, the greatest American painter of the period. Most settled in Canada. Some eventually returned, although several state governments excluded the Loyalists from holding public office. In the decades after the Revolution, Americans preferred to forget about the Loyalists. Apart from Copley, the Loyalists became nonpersons in American history.

# The French Enter the War

During the long, hard winter at Valley Forge, Washington’s troops benefited from the training and discipline of the Prussian military officer Baron Friedrich von Steuben (sent by the French) and the leadership of the French aristocrat Marquis de Lafayette. On June 28, 1778, as British forces under Sir Henry Clinton (who had replaced Howe as supreme commander) attempted to withdraw from Philadelphia to New York, Washington’s army attacked them near Monmouth, New Jersey. The battle effectively ended in a draw, as the Americans held their ground, but Clinton was able to

get his army and supplies safely to New York. On July 8, a French fleet commanded by the Comte d’Estaing arrived off the Atlantic coast, ready to do battle with the British. A joint attack on the British at Newport, Rhode Island, in late July failed, and for the most part the war settled into a stalemate phase in the North.

*George Washington waves to the arrival of French ship*

At the same time as Clinton's army was being shipped to New York, the first French force arrived in American waters. A French fleet under the Comte d'Estaing had been able to sail from Toulon and make its way to America after the British decided to keep their fleet in home waters to defend against a French invasion. The French fleet was larger than that commanded by Admiral Lord Richard Howe but the British fleet was safe in New York harbour, made safe by a shallow bar across the entrance. Frustrated at New York, Washington and Estaing then decided to attack Newport, Rhode Island, a superb harbour that had been in British hands since December 1776.

The siege of Newport, the first combined Franco-American campaign was not encouraging. Estaing did not get on well with General John Sullivan, the American commander in the area, but they did come up with an attack for a joint attack on August 10, 1778. This was not to be carried out. Sullivan crossed onto Rhode Island early on the ninth, one day early, alienating Estaing. Later in the day Admiral Howe appeared with a reinforced fleet. Estaing decided against risking a landing, and sailed out to face Howe, but the weather prevented any battle and the fleets were scattered by a storm. Sullivan attempted an attack on 14 August, which failed. He then waited for the French to return, but when they did Sullivan was to be disappointed. Estaing was not interested in continuing the siege and sailed away, first for Boston and repairs and then for the West Indies.

The Americans suffered a number of setbacks from 1779 to 1781, including the defection of General Benedict Arnold to the British and the first serious mutinies within the Continental Army. In the South, the British occupied Georgia by early 1779 and captured Charleston, South Carolina in May 1780. British forces under Lord Charles Cornwallis then began an offensive in the region, crushing General Gates’ American troops at Camden in mid-August, though the Americans scored a victory over Loyalist forces at King’s Mountain in early October. Nathanael Green replaced Gates as the American commander in the South that December. Under Green’s command, General Daniel Morgan scored a victory against a British force led by Colonel Banastre Tarleton at Cowpens, South Carolina, on January 17, 1781.

# Siege of Yorktown and the End of the War

If a British victory in battle could leave their position weakened, a major defeat would be catastrophic, and it was to that major defeat that Cornwallis was now marching. On May 15, 1797, General William Phillips, an old comrade of Cornwallis and commander of British troops on the Chesapeake, died. He was replaced by Benedict Arnold, much to the annoyance of many British officers, but five days later Cornwallis arrived and took command. He now had a combined command of 6,000 men, but his plans for a campaign in Virginia were only to last until late June, when orders reached him from General Henry Clinton, British Commander-in-Chief in North America. Clinton was worried about the prospect of a combined American and French attack on New York, while he was advised by the navy that they did not have a good winter anchorage near to New York, and so he ordered Cornwallis to fortify a naval base on the Chesapeake, while warning that he may soon need some troops from Cornwallis. During July Cornwallis examined potential sites at Yorktown and Portsmouth. This period was one in which the British commanders were at odds. Cornwallis was not convinced that a base on the Chesapeake had any value unless for a full scale invasion of Virginia, while Clinton did not see the value of such a campaign, and was still concerned about an attack on New York, even though his own forces still outnumbered the combined American and French forces. While warning that the position was not suitable for defence and that he had not enough men to build the defences, on 2 August Cornwallis landed his troops at Yorktown, having decided not to send any to Clinton, and began to fortify his position.



*Surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown*

Washington now began the campaign that was to seal his reputation and effectively end the war. He had hoped to launch an attack on New York, and in May Marshal Rochambeau, commander of the French Expeditionary Force, had agreed to move his troops from Newport to aid this attack. However, although some activity took place around New York in July, the British position was too strong and little came of the plans. Since June Washington had know that Admiral Grasse was heading for America from Brest in France, but his actual destination, and the effect he would have, was unknown. On August 14, news arrived that Grasse was sailing for the Chesapeake, with twenty-nine ships and three thousand men. Combined with Washington's own army, and Rochambeau's army and fleet, it would be possible for the allies to gain a decisive advantage in the Chesapeake for long enough to defeat Cornwallis.

The British made an attempt to defeat the French fleet. De Grasse sailed from Saint Domingue with twenty-eight ships on the line on August 5, reaching the Chesapeake on August 30. The next day Admiral Graves in command of the combined British fleet sailed from New York. The two fleets came together on September 5, (*battle of the Capes*). In a two hour battle neither side lost a ship, but both suffered serious damage, and the British were forced from the area, leaving Cornwallis isolated by sea. Clinton had also failed to warn him that Washington may be marching south, still convinced an attack on New York was imminent. Cornwallis thus decided against an attempt to fight his way out. However, Washington had started to move his men south in mid-August, and by the middle of September Washington, Rochambeau, Lafayette and de Grasse were all concentrated against Cornwallis. Cut off by the French fleet, he now found himself surrounded by 16,000 American and French troops. Starting on the evening of 28 September and all day on September 29, the allies moved into position around Cornwallis. 

*Battle of the Capes, 1781*

Overnight on September 29, Cornwallis abandoned his outer positions, and moved his force into the inner defences. This move has since been criticised, but Cornwallis had good reasons to make it. His force was massively outnumbered, and the inner defences would be much easier to defend. Clinton had assured him that relief was on the way. Finally, the American and French siege guns did not arrive until 6 October. For the first week of the siege the British guns were able to cause the allies some discomfort, but there were not enough of them. Once the allied guns arrived the situation changed. On 9 October Washington himself fired the first shot of a massive artillery bombardment, which soon reduced the British defenders to a wretched state. After nearly two weeks of constant bombardment and with no sign of relief from Clinton Cornwallis finally gave up. On October 17, Cornwallis offered to surrender, and after two days of negotiation the surrender agreement was signed on October 19. At two in the afternoon, to the sound of mournful music, the British marched into captivity.

Although the fighting was not entirely over, Yorktown marked the end of any serious British hopes. What followed was a series of withdrawals from the remaining British posts. British troops left Savannah on July 11, 1782, Charleston on December 18, 1782 and finally New York on November 25, 1783. The remaining Loyalists were left with two choices - come to terms with the new conditions in America or leave, with most who did leave going to Canada or the Caribbean. British military efforts turned to resisting the French and Spanish.

# Outcome of the War

The end of the war was formally negotiated in the Treaty of Paris during the summer of 1783.

Article 1 of the Treaty established the United States of America as a sovereign state.The treaty was signed in Paris on September 3, 1783 and ratified by Congress on January 14, 1784.

*The War of the Revolution was finally over and the United States of America established as an independent country.*

In many ways the French were the main losers in the war. Effectively abandoned by their American allies, the French made peace on January 20, 1783. The French had hoped to gain a new client state in America, as well as to make gains in the Caribbean and regain lands lost in India. Instead, France had to be content with Senegal, Tobago and a small area around Pondicherry in India. Peace with Spain was agreed on the same day with Britain keeping Gibraltar while Spain gained East and West Florida. While Anglo-American trade revived after the war, the French were to be disappointed in their hopes of a prosperous relationship with America. Instead the cost of the war helped bankrupt the French government and contributed to the crisis of 1787-9 and to *the French Revolution* after that. Many of the Frenchmen who had fought for American liberty were to find the struggle for French liberty to be a very uncomfortable experience. By a final irony, the improvements to the navy forced on the British by French aid to the Americans left the Royal Navy in a far better position to defend Britain at the start of the revolutionary wars.

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